



When Formality Works: Authority and Abstraction in Law and Organizations

Arthur L. Stinchcombe

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In this innovative exploration of the concept of formality, or governing by abstraction, Arthur Stinchcombe breathes new life into an idea that scholars have all but ignored in recent years.

We have come to assume that governing our social activities by advance planning—by creating abstract descriptions of what ought to happen and adjusting these descriptions as situations change—is not as efficient and responsive as dealing directly with the real substance of the situation at hand. Stinchcombe argues the opposite. When a plan is designed to correct itself and keep up with the reality it is meant to govern, it can be remarkably successful. He points out a wide range of examples where this is the case, including architectural blueprints, immigration law, the construction of common law by appeals courts, Fannie Mae's secondary mortgage market, and scientific paradigms and programs.

Arguing that formality has been misconceived as consisting mainly of its defects, Stinchcombe shows how formality, at its best, can serve us much better than ritual obedience to poorly laid plans or a romantic appeal to "real life."

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